

BOOK REVIEW

The new biological economy: How New Zealanders are creating value from the land. Eric Pawson and the Biological Economies Team (Richard le Heron, Hugh Campbell, Matthew Henry, Erena Le Heron, Katharine Legun, Nick Lewis, Harvey C. Perkins, Michael Roche and Christopher Rosin). Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2018. 290 pp. ISBN 978-1-86940-888-6

This book is so good that it has the potential to reinvigorate international rural geographies. In the past, New Zealand has often served as an important laboratory for social science research into rural areas at the global scale, and it is evident that this role continues, not least given the activities of a decade-long “Biological Economies” research programme involving multiple layers of expertise from New Zealand’s rural research community. In a nutshell, the program has engaged with two sets of processes: how productivist approaches to land-based industry, involving the scaling up of output volumes as part of commodity-based booms, have led to inevitable loss of economic value and heightened environmental degradation; and how post-productivist responses have sought to add value and values through new relational connections and narratives of provenance. Following the previous publication of findings from the research program aimed more specifically at the theoretically-informed academic audience (Le Heron, Campbell, Lewis, & Carolan, 2016), this book aims to make itself accessible to a wider readership, not least to the lay stakeholders whose insights provided the core inputs that render its content both intelligible and useful.

And, (somewhat amazingly, given the high failure rate of self-confessedly “cross-over” books by academic researchers) it works really well! Authors of chapters should be congratulated for their efforts here, and credit is also due to the musterer-in-chief, Eric Pawson, who, it seems, has worked hard to even out some the inevitable intellectual and stylistic convolutions arising from multiple authorship. What emerges is a series of informative, down-to-earth and well-illustrated contributions that illuminate key aspects of the post-productivist landscape in rural New Zealand. Insights

are offered into both a range of different arenas of production in the biological economy (although strangely not forestry or fishing), and a range of different place-based case studies. Although risking some overlap between these two categories, the result is a series of fascinating accounts that reflect both the geographies and the political economies involved.

Two particular aspects of the book mark it out as a key contribution both to New Zealand literature and to the wider canon of rural geography. First, the researchers have clearly made genuine and sustained attempts, over a decade or so, to listen to and engage with a wide range of key players in these new post-productivist networks of relations. The resultant account sacrifices some of the fluff of knowingly-conceptualised academic analysis in order to allow the power of specific narratives to emerge in their own right. The result is a wonderful cornucopia of “scratch-and-sniff” geographies, powerfully conjuring up the “real” worlds out there that are the legitimate focus of attention in this publication. From the softness of merino fabric compared to scratchy and stinky alternatives, to the giant tentacular irrigators crawling across dairying landscapes, and from the thrilling and unexpectedly different sensation of the New Zealand wine-tasting experience, to the dam-burst of tourists disgorged from cruise ships into small townships, the book paints compelling pictures of different aspects of the rural scene. The desire for accessible engagement with lay readers is achieved successfully, and additionally serves to provide important material and affective resources for academic researchers seeking to get under the skin of the multidimensional nature and capacities of rurality.

The second achievement of the book is to stand back from these detailed accounts to provide equally grounded pointers to the future of the biological economy. To some extent, this future is about innovative companies producing high-value, place-specific, products that generate new networks to niche markets. However, there is more to it than this. For example, the understanding presented of the Māori “Taniwha” land-based economy presents both practical and metaphorical lessons for the future of New Zealand agriculture. These include pointers towards how to do production and consumption differently, in ways that embrace traditional values of guardianship over resources, and foster relationships that flow from alternative cultural politics rather than from a race-to-the-bottom searching for profit through mass production. Defining “values” in these ethical as well as economic terms, the biological economies team accentuate the need for land-based industries to continue to build careful value-building relationships fuelled by compelling value-generating narratives in order to secure a sustainable future in a globalising world.

As with any good book, the high quality of discussion raises its own questions, and it is here that more conceptual issues perhaps raise their heads again. To what extent does the emphasis on the value of narratives risk overplaying the representational process of “telling good marketing stories” and underplaying the role of non-human agency and relations in assembling that which is valuable? Would more specific attention to the more-than-human nature of land-based assemblages help to generate more enactive and performative understandings? Also, what is known about what we might call “affective values,” that is, the affective capacities of these

assemblages to conjure up particular “moods” of production and consumption that impact on the ways in which resultant commodities are embedded in the material and ethical lives of consumers?

These are, I am sure, issues that the biological economies team will have been grappling with, in one form or another, during their research program. And if so, the lesson of this book is that there are very significant gains to be made in addressing these questions in ways that are grounded, accessible, and sensitive to the needs of lay and well as academic readers. As it is, the interpretative power and contemporary relevance of rural geography has been enhanced by *The New Biological Economy*. This book provides a refreshingly clear and thoughtful account of the dynamic land-based economy in New Zealand. Moreover, given current global uncertainties relating to continuing agricultural subsidies, and the role of populist politics in the renegotiation of trading arrangements, these grounded conclusions from New Zealand's rural laboratory will also have wide-reaching international relevance and significance during the next phase of rural geography inquiry.

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REFERENCE

- Le Heron, R., Campbell, H., Lewis, N., & Carolan, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Biological economies: Experimentation and the politics of agri-food frontiers*. Abingdon: Routledge.